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The First Time I Met H

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THE FIRST TIME I MET H.

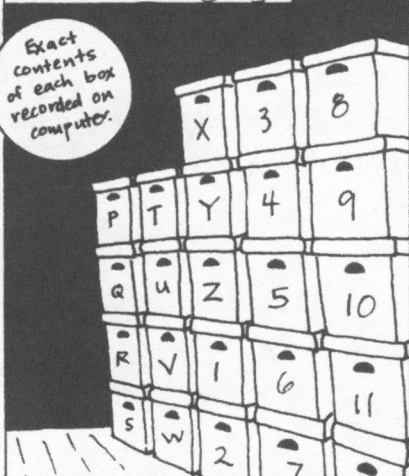
was on Sunday, March 30, 2003.

[by Maggie McKnight]

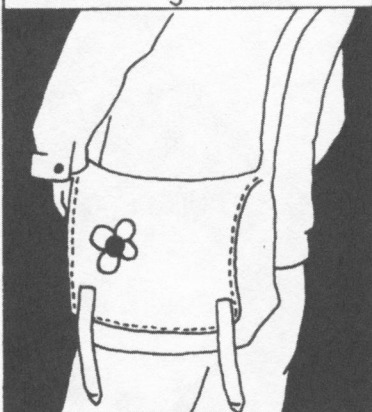
I'd quit my desk job, moved out of my Berkeley cottage, and was spending a month traveling around the country.



All my belongings were stashed in my mom's attic and garage.



About six weeks before my trip, I'd started dating a friend of a friend and was falling for her fast.



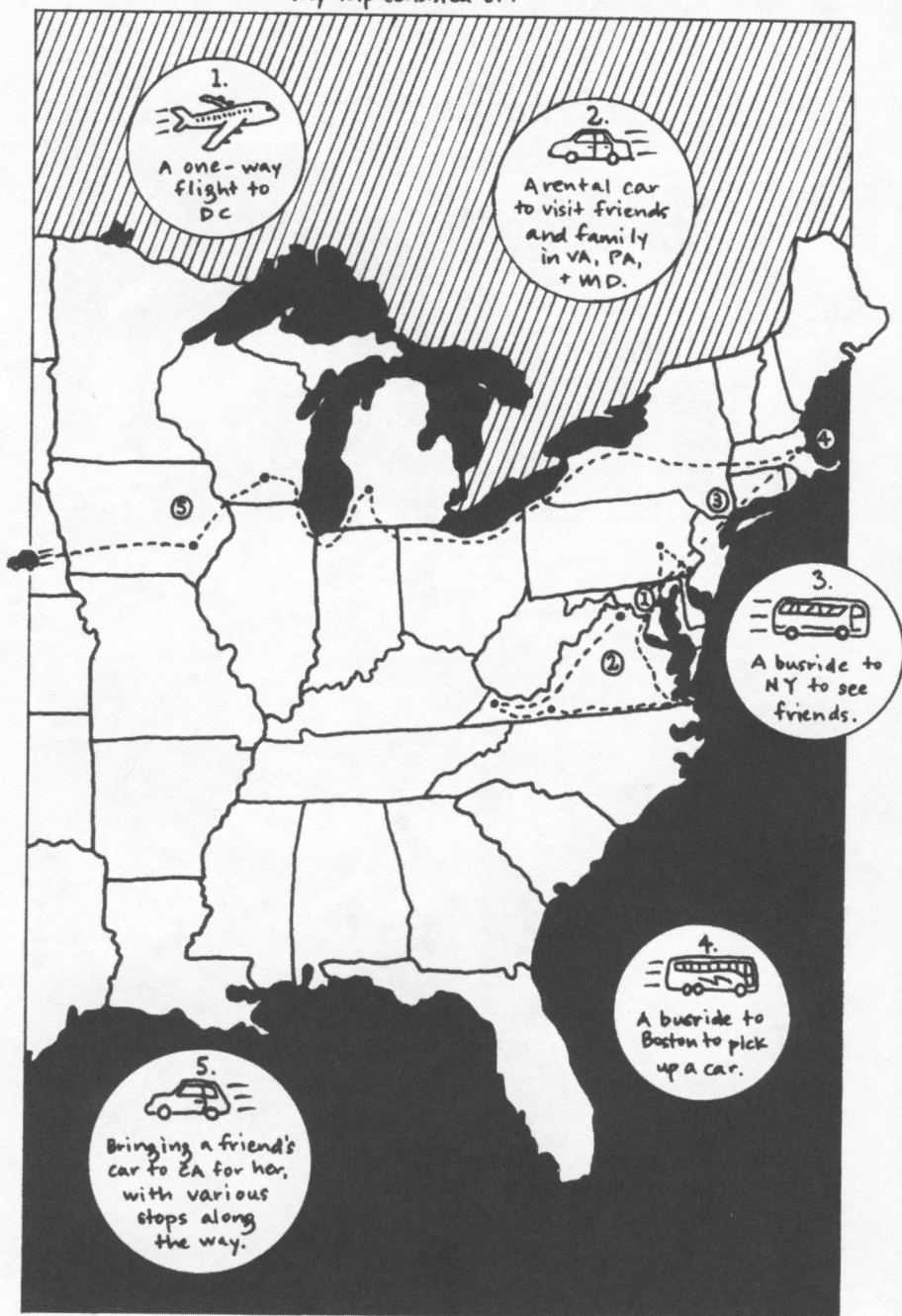
Too fast, the way you can see only in retrospect is not healthy and definitely not love and probably not even about her, but about your own longing to be nurtured.

The night before I left, J. suggested out of the blue that we "see other people" — and then she promptly fell asleep.



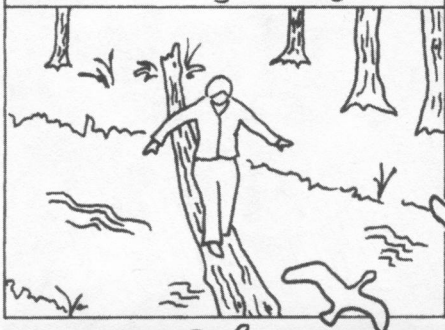
Later, I would suspect she'd just heard from her ex-girlfriend, the one who broke her heart, the one she swore she was over — but at the time I was oblivious to the red flags.

My trip consisted of:

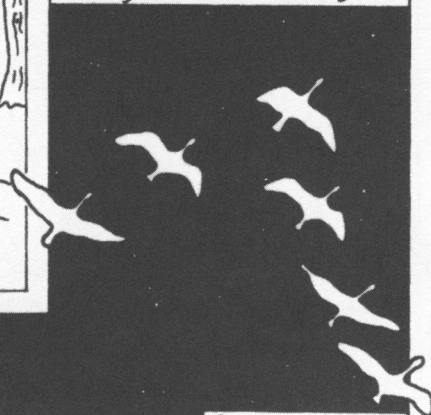


The whole thing lasted 28 days.

In Culpeper, VA, my friend S. coached me on how to ask for what I wanted from J., who was becoming increasingly aloof.



One night, arriving alone at a motel in the middle of nowhere, I looked up to see a V of geese flying overhead, honking.



Somehow, seeing their great white bellies, I felt safe. Nothing would harm me that night.

Next, I retraced the route of a bicycle trip I'd taken through the Appalachians five years earlier. All the people I visited asked if I was married yet.



RUTH + FRENCHIE
SMITH MTN. LAKE, VA

I wanted to tell the whole truth — that technically, people like me can't get married, not that it mattered anyway, since I was dating someone who was pulling away faster than I could say "girlfriend" — but instead I simply said no.



In Mouth of Wilson, VA, I stayed with a friend who builds guitars. I thought of J. obsessively.

I counted the days 'til I'd see her — 23, if I drove fast.

In Winchester, I saw my great-aunt and -uncle for the first time in 20 years. I'd hardly known them before and was surprised to find how much I liked them.

ME WITH
SHORT HAIR

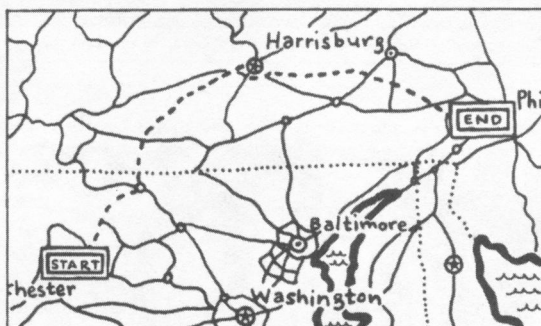


JOAN NEVER
REALLY LET GO OF
ALL THE BAD THINGS
THAT HAPPENED
WHEN WE WERE
KIDS....

MARY (MY
DAD'S MOM'S
SISTER)

They told me lots of family stories, beat me in a few Scrabble games, and made fresh-squeezed orange juice every morning.

I cried on the
phone with J.
for most of
the drive to
Philadelphia. She
felt like we'd
gone too fast.



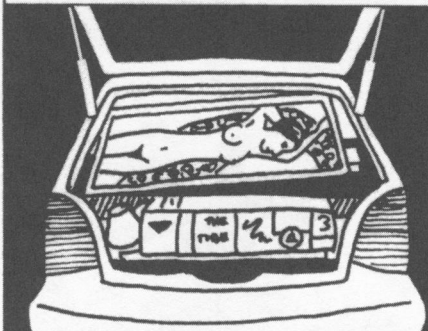
She had been the one who'd asked me out first, and in our first few weeks of dating, she'd emailed or called daily. Now I was usually the one calling her.



I was in New York when the war in Iraq started. I went to a peace march in Manhattan, and even amidst hundreds of thousands of strangers, I felt a comforting sense of connection.

I called my
friend S. from
Washington
Square Park,
and J., who was
temporarily
staying in S.'s
basement,
answered. I was
overjoyed.

When I picked up my friend's car in Boston, it was half full of her stuff.

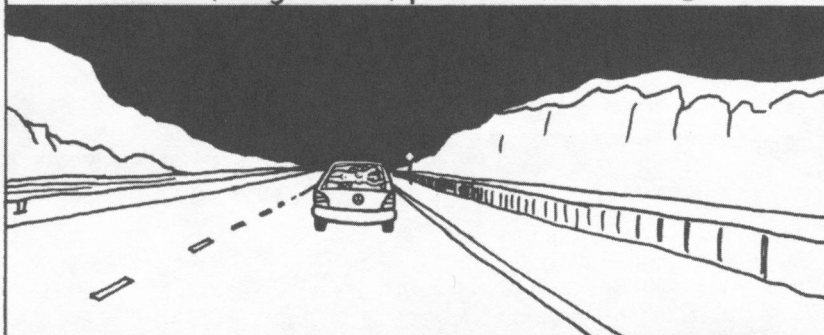


I had 3000 miles to go and a painting of a naked woman in my back window.

Somewhere
outside Buffalo,
the motels all started
to look the same.

Then, driving
through Ohio along
Lake Erie, I felt like
I was on the edge of
a vast frozen
wasteland.

I called J. from the road somewhere between Grand Rapids and Madison.
She didn't ask anything about my past few days of driving alone.



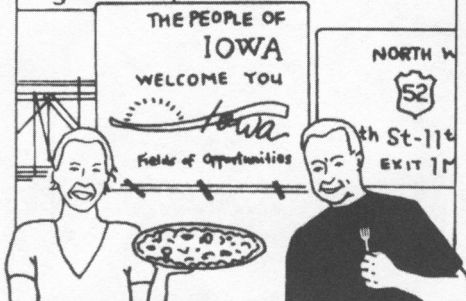
I hated how badly I wanted her attention.

In Wisconsin, I had my first-ever glimpse of the prairie.



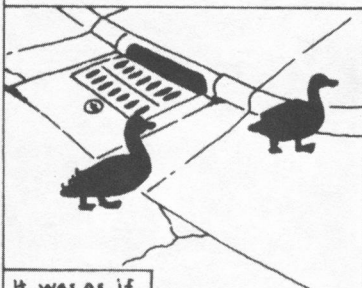
Then, finally,
I crossed the Mississippi into what was soon to become my new home state.

I'd never been to the Midwest, but I was planning to move to Iowa in four months for grad school.



M. & R., friends of some friends in Berkeley, had a homemade pizza in the oven when I arrived.

The next day it was 80 degrees out. There were mallard ducks crossing the street downtown.



It was as if the universe was conspiring to trick me into thinking that moving from Berkeley to Iowa was a reasonable thing to do.

I visited professors and met with students — everyone was incredibly nice. On Sunday I went to a presentation where a panel of students read from their work.

One, a mom in a "divorced" lesbian family, read an essay about driving her daughter back to the other mom's house after a visit.

WHEN WE CROSS THE RIVER, WE DO TOGETHER WHAT I USED TO DO AS A KID: PULL IN A BIG LUNGFUL OF ONE STATE'S AIR, THEN BREATHE IT OUT IN THE NEW STATE, MIXING WHERE WE USED TO BE WITH WHERE WE ARE NOW...



Now, looking back, I don't remember why I started crying:

- because the woman reading, in spite of the failed relationship, had what I really wanted, which was a kid?
- because dating J. had stirred up my long-repressed desire to have not just a kid but also a partner, a family?

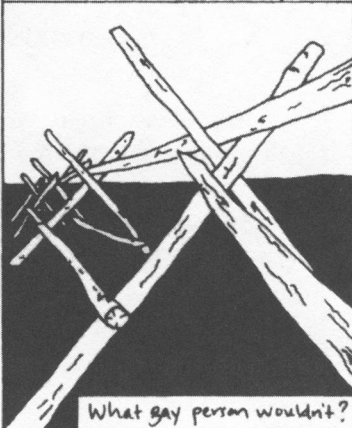
I think both things were true for me at the time.

On my last morning in Iowa, I sat at M. + R.'s table and thought for the first time about having a baby during grad school.



My journal: "Maybe I'll get pregnant while I'm still in school... I can do it, even if I'm alone. I know I can."

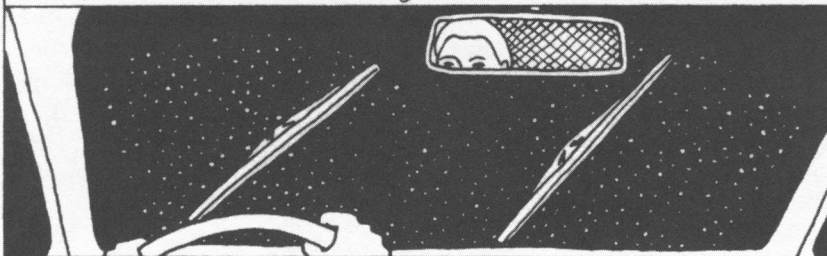
The next day, driving through Laramie, Wyoming, I thought a lot about Matthew Shepherd.



What gay person wouldn't?

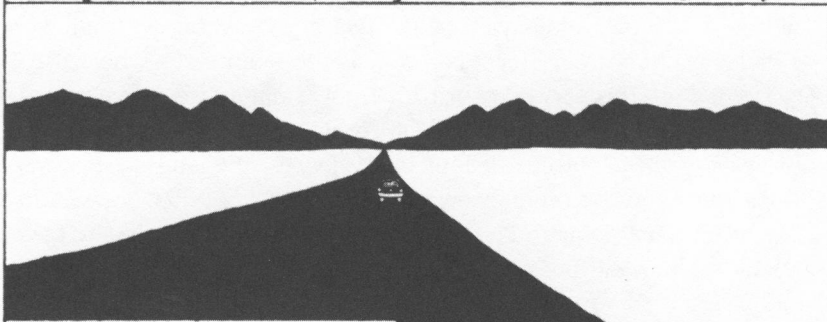
I felt very alone. My cell phone was out of range, and I was racing home to a lousy relationship.

I hit a huge blizzard just past Salt Lake City that slowed me to 25MPH. It was midnight, and the next town was 80 miles off.



A few miles later, a rest stop appeared, and I pulled over and slept in the car.

When I woke the next morning in the Great Salt Lake valley, the sun was shining and a blanket of sparkling snow covered everything in sight.



I started on my way, a tiny speck in a huge snowscape, eager to become whoever I was bound to become.